



VISN 17 Heart of Texas Health Care Network Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans

Overview

The VISN 17 Center of Excellence (COE) for Research on Returning War Veterans was originated in 2006 when Congress instructed the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to designate the Waco campus as a Center of Excellence to focus on mental health/post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) needs. The COE enables VA to consolidate personnel, training, and specialized resources in an efficient manner to improve knowledge related to treatment, prevention, rehabilitation, and clinical services to our nation's veterans, with particular focus on those veterans returning from Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom (OEF/OIF). Central Texas has one of the highest concentrations of returning veterans in the country, with a current total of over 25,000 unique OEF/OIF veterans registered in the system. Located on the historic Waco VA campus and hosted by the Central Texas Veterans Health Care (CTVHCS) facility, the VISN 17 Center of Excellence enjoys a mutually beneficial relationship with not only CTVHCS and healthcare facilities within VISN 17, but also exercises enthusiastic relationships with Department of Defense, Texas A&M Health Science Center College of Medicine, Baylor University, Boston University, and a host of other academic, healthcare, federal, state and local entities.

About Post-Deployment Mental Illness

Accumulating evidence from epidemiologic and clinical studies of troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suggests that significant numbers of veterans suffer from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mild to moderate traumatic brain injury (TBI), or both, and a variety of related health and behavioral health problems. These problems negatively affect the quality of life of returnees and their family members. The Department of Veterans Affairs is committed to providing the highest standard of care to veterans with post-deployment mental illnesses.

Mission

The primary mission of the VISN 17 Center of Excellence (COE) is to (1) develop, implement, and disseminate research into the causes of PTSD and other mental health disorders and their effect on combat veterans and their significant others; and (2) provide education for health care specialists and administrators around improved methods of diagnosing and treating individuals with mental health problems, especially veterans. The COE serves as a major source of expertise on the mental health consequences of war to legislative bodies such as Congress, and serves as an internationally visible focus of research activity on psychological problems of combat veterans. Programmatically, the COE is aligned under the Office of Mental Health Services at VA Central Office.

Research

The research component is composed of five core areas: Assessment, Treatment Development and Treatment Outcome, Neuroimaging and Genetics, Information Security and BioEthics, and Education. Each core is in collaboration with the other key areas so that knowledge gained from one area can be immediately applied in another area.

Clinical

The Clinical component seeks to define, model, champion and refine the continuum of care for OIF/OEF mental health needs via the public health model. In support of this goal, the clinical component serves as a key driver for the dissemination of evidence-based, actionable quality of care elements across the VISN 17 Network and the Veterans Health Administration in close collaboration with VA medical centers, DoD, local, state and regional community systems of care and informal community care networks.

Education

The Education component develops educational materials and experiences to positively impact the mental health of OIF/OEF veterans. These projects target health care providers, veterans, families, clergy, and community members both within VISN 17 and nationally. Methods of delivery include live presentations, print materials, recordings, and the web. The Education component seeks to translate

best practices and challenging research concepts for other audiences to bridge the gap between research and clinical care.

Selected Studies and Projects

- Project SERVE (Study Evaluating Returning Veterans' Experiences) is a prospective, longitudinal assessment study of 1000 returning OEF/OIF veterans. The study aims to identifying pathways to the development of, and patterns of expression in, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder (MDD), and alcohol- and substance-use disorders (SUD).
- RESPECT-P Study is a health care management project investigating the efficacy of the collaborative care model for PTSD management in Primary Care. Outpatients are randomized into normal care or managed care, which consists primarily of more frequent contacts by phone with staff. The study is led by PI's from the National Center for PTSD and is being performed at Waco, Dallas, Austin and Fort Worth VA outpatient facilities with the assistance of the COE.
- Genetics of Brain Anatomy (GOBA) is research study that investigates the biological basis of PTSD and depression in active duty troops and VA enrollees from the OEF/OIF deployment. Subjects receive two MRI and psychophysiological testing sessions over a three-month period and relationships between changes in symptomatology, brain function and biological markers will be assessed in 300 subjects. The experiments will be conducted in the COE mobile 3T MRI and support vehicle, which will travel from Waco to Temple and Fort Hood.
- The TexVet initiative provides comprehensive community outreach to OEF/OIF military service members, veterans and their families by providing healthcare information and other resources to the community. The TexVet project is a partnering venture among VA, DOD, State of Texas, Advocacy and Community Agencies, and through the enhancement of the Texas 2-1-1 Information and Referral Network and development of a web-based portal, www.texvet.com, TexVet serves as a reliable central reference for military service members, veterans, their families and community members.

Selected Publications:

Kareken, DA, Bragular V, Dzemdziec M, Cox C, Talavage T, **Davidson D**, O'Connor SJ (2010) Family History of alcoholism mediates the frontal response to alcohol drink odors and alcohol in at-risk drinkers, *NeuroImage* 50; 267-276

Longabaugh R, Wirtz PW, **Gulliver SB, Davidson, D** (2009) Extended naltrexone and broad spectrum treatment or motivational enhancement therapy. *Psychopharmacology*, 206: 367-376

Tharp, D. & Tharp, K. (2009). Situational Awareness and Mindful Eating. *Air Force Reserve Command Fitness* (3) 2, 8-9.

Nelson-Gray, R.O., Lootens, C. M., Mitchell, J. T., Hundt, N. E., Robertson, C. D., & **Kimbrel, N. A.** (2009). Assessment and treatment of personality disorders: A behavioral perspective. *The Behavior Analyst Today*, 10, 13 – 45.

Leadership

Director: **Suzy Bird Gulliver, PhD**

Administrator / Business and Strategic Management Core Leader (Acting): **Barbie Christian**

Research Director: **Dena Davidson, PhD**

Assessment Core Leader: **Sandra B. Morissette, PhD**

Education and Dissemination Core Leader: **David Tharp, PsyD**

Information Security and BioEthics Core Leader: Vacant

Neuroimaging and Genetics Core Leader: **Keith A. Young, PhD**

Treatment Development and Treatment Outcome Core Leader: **John Klocek, PhD**

Internal Advisory Panel Chair: **Paul Hicks, MD, PhD**

External Advisory Panel Chair: **Walter E. Penk, PhD**

Contact

VISN 17 Center of Excellence
VA Medical Center
4800 Memorial Drive (151C)
Waco, TX 76711
(254) 297-3586